

The Fine Art of Cube Etiquette

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Many people in today's work force toil away in cubeville. So, there's an excellent chance that your first job out of college will find you in a cubicle, too.

On a typical cubicle farm, there are a lot of little boxes next to other little boxes, with not a lot of room for privacy. And it is this very lack of privacy that makes cubicle courtesy so important in the workplace. After all, we can see, hear, and smell just about everything that goes on in the next cubicle...and our neighbors are seeing, hearing, and smelling us too.

The most basic rule of cubicle courtesy is to treat the cubicle as though it was an office with walls. The cubicle walls should establish a private area. If you're approaching someone else's cubicle, respect that area. Knock gently on the side when trying to get someone's attention. This gives someone an opportunity to put up a hand or signal that they don't wish to be bothered. This is a critical courtesy for employees who work on deadline yet don't have a door to close to signal that they can't be disturbed.

Pretending there are walls is a good rule of thumb for cubicle dwellers—when you're outside a neighbor's cubicle. When you're inside your own cubicle, however, remember that those walls are only imaginary—and the actual panels that separate cubicles do not provide the privacy that office dwellers have. Here's a sense-by-sense breakdown of common cubicle complaints and the common sense solutions:

NOISE: Most complaints about cubicle neighbors center on noise control. When co-workers sit closely together, it's hard to avoid all noise concerns, but it's important to be aware of the people on either side of you. Develop a telephone voice so that your conversations aren't being overheard. Do your best not to listen in to your neighbors' phone conversations—and if you do hear them, never repeat what you heard. Personal cell phones should be kept off until break time, and never use a speaker phone—it's distracting to the entire office.

However, the problems don't stop once the phone is hung up. Be conscious when using radios in your cubicle and, if it's permissible, wear headphones as an act of courtesy to your neighbors. If a family member or friend visits, keep chitchat to a minimum, or take your visitor to the break room to talk. And remember—everyone in the vicinity can hear what you're saying, so it's smart to keep conversations about your personal life—or your negative opinion about your new supervisor—to yourself.

But talk isn't the only noise that "cheapens" the office environment. It seems that some employees make "little sounds" that they aren't aware of—but their neighbors are. Little noise that can be offensive include gum-cracking, coffee-slurping, ice-chomping, pen-tapping and, most offensive of all, full-bellied belching. A cubicle is a public area, and those working inside should act as they would in any other public area. If you wouldn't do it in a fine restaurant, don't do it in your cubicle.

SMELLS: After the noise is controlled, it's time to follow your nose (and be cognizant of your neighbors' noses). A major faux pas is applying or wearing too much perfume while in a cubicle environment. Cheap cologne or aftershave tends to give those nearby headaches, and even worse, some people have perfume allergies and really suffer from the variety of scents in the air. Keep your fragrance choices simple, and if a co-worker has allergies, stick to an after-shower powder.

Just because you're in your cubicle doesn't mean you have the freedom to take off your shoes. This looks unprofessional and, even worse, the odor will travel beyond your space. Also remember that the hoagie with garlic and extra onions may smell delicious to you, but it could be turning the stomach of your co-worker. If you must eat pungent food, take it to the lunchroom.

TOUCH: Remember, there is no lock on your door. That means the cubicle is not the place to store valuables. But that open-door policy doesn't mean that everything is up for grabs. Don't take things from someone's cubicle without asking—including tape dispensers, scissors, and staplers. Your neighbor's cubicle is not a supply closet.

SIGHTS: Cubicle décor should comply with company standards. Remember that not everyone shares your sense of humor, so leave the joke posters at home, so you don't inadvertently offend co-workers or clients. One last word about sight cube etiquette—resist glancing into other people's cubicles as you walk by, and don't wander in without invitation. The cubicle is someone's work area, and should be treated as such. Professionalism and courtesy are the keys to cubicle etiquette, so take time to know your co-workers and their individual preferences.

Courtesy of the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#).